

## Witch's Hour (Dark Fantasy Novella, Excerpt)

Before she let them take the stag, Esmelda did one last thing: her hands greased with its own hot fat and gritty with black spices, sigils for gluttony and hunger-lust ground into her palms, she massaged the beast as one might a lover, from the charred wreck of its neck to its crisp, round rump.

Only when she felt the spell leave her, when she was satisfied it was done, did she let her boys near it.

The stag was to be the main course for the new king and his entourage of rowdy young lords, just returned from a hunt in the north hills. Esmelda had skinned and butchered the beast herself, breathed her magic into every part, from heart to hoof. She'd even tended the great roasting pits behind the castle. Her hands were raw with blisters from the day's work, but the meal now proceeding to the king could not have been more perfect if a dozen doves flew out when he cut into its ruddy, gleaming haunch.

It took six lads to hoist the stag into Castle Lochhunte's great hall. Another boy led the way, the enormous rack of antlers raised in triumph. Its arrival was greeted with raucous approval from the hunting party, but King Sutton was not part of their chorus. Esmelda watched him from behind the screen, sweat running rivers down her neck and between her breasts.

The old king had loved her cooking, but he'd been a simple man with simple tastes. This new one, young Sutton, was a stranger at Lochhunte. Fostered in the north country from the time he could walk, he'd had the crown thrust at him after the sleeping sickness took his father and his elder brothers, too. Now he had a kingdom to consolidate, a reputation to solidify. Which meant Esmelda—a woman cook, and foreign-born at that—had to secure her place as well.

She'd sent out her signature dishes, the best ale. The king's guests looked pleased, but Sutton drank less than his companions, and barely tasted anything.

When the stag was in place, Sutton stepped down from the dais, all lithe muscle and lazy grace. No obsequious lord had to let this one win the hunt. Esmelda had heard the story a hundred times over that morning; how the stag had turned just before being cornered in a gully and come right at the king's horse as if he meant to run it through. Before the dogs could even double back, the king dropped the great beast with an arrow square in the throat.

As Sutton made the ceremonial cut, his hounds scrabbled to get closer. He gave them a good-natured kick and the hall rang with laughter. He raised a piece to his mouth. Esmelda bit the cuff of her sleeve, sucking old blood between her teeth.

The king waved his hand, and everything seemed to roar into life. Kitchen lads began to wrench the stag apart, piling heaps of fire-kissed meat onto platters with roasted roots and apples. Maids made rounds with more ale and trenchers. King Sutton returned to his bench and dipped into a venison stew, black and thick with blood and the last of the starspice from Esmelda's special stock. His eyes found her across the hall. He gave a nod, and Esmelda let out her breath.

"See to the next course." She gave a shove to the waifish lad who was hiding behind her skirts. "And if the pears aren't sweet enough, Jamie, I'll cut out your tongue and bake it in a tart."

After the inferno of her kitchen, the late-autumn air in the garden felt blessedly cool. Esmelda walked briskly between rows of herbs and hardy vegetables until she reached the small cemetery in the far corner, nestled between the garden wall and a hedge of thick, fragrant rosemary. She peeled off her sopping bonnet and tugged at the top laces of her kirtle.

A gibbous moon leered down at her. Esmelda grinned in return, raised her skirts, and turned her backside to the graves. Delicious gooseflesh broke out over her arse.

A fox wailed. Cold wind shook the rosemary, tiny claws raking across Esmelda's bare thighs. Esmelda laughed. "Och, jealous, are we?"

She saw a shadow detach from the castle. It skittered toward her over strewn leaves and hoarfrost. A moment later, Jamie peered up at her, shivering. He raised his hand. He looked ghostly in the moonlight, all wide, white eyes.

"What is it, mouse?" Esmelda took a morsel from him, her other hand still holding up her skirts. Sweetness and spice oozed over her tongue. She smacked her honey lips and ruffled the lad's thick mop of hair—Wanderer black, like hers. She could almost imagine he was kin, though she knew for a fact he was the runt of a kitchen wench, dead from the flux almost nine years now. "It's fine," she said, then whacked his ear. "Get back to work."

As he ran off, Esmelda let her skirts fall. She looked at the newest grave, a half-hearted cairn of stone that was already sinking into the earth. She glanced at the moon again, judging the hour.

“Rise and shine, you old bastard.” Esmelda spat on the ground and strode off, back into the fiery hell of her domain.

Esmelda sent Jamie off to sleep with the rest of the serving boys in the undercrofts below the kitchen. The king had retired hours ago, along with the last of his guests. Servants and hounds slept on benches and among the rushes.

The maids were in beds down the hall, separated from wandering lads and lords by Esmelda’s own quarters, though Esmelda herself was rarely there. The old fat cook, Ballard, had lived in that room. When he died, she’d stripped it of everything—clothing, bed linens—and burned it all in the fire pits. Still she could smell him in the walls, the floor, taste him on the air.

The kitchen, too, had been Ballard’s, but at least it didn’t smell like him. It smelled of abundance, and work. Purpose. When she slept, it was usually in there, as she’d done as a girl.

That night, Esmelda drifted; she banked the fire, stirred kettles, set out dough to rise for morning bread. She checked the bundles of onions and herbs hanging from the ceiling, watched when they began to sway where there was no breeze. She closed her eyes and breathed the earthen, resinous scent of rosemary as her skirts twitched, and a phantom hand slid along her thigh.

“I fed a dozen strong young lords tonight.” It was pride as much as exhaustion that made Esmelda’s voice husky. “Did you see the way they licked their fingers?”

The cold not-touch went higher, wrapping around the curve of her arse. Esmelda swallowed her revulsion and moved to the basin that Jamie had filled for her. She began to wash, making a haughty show of it. “How many lords do you think I could make a meal of before the sun rises?” she purred. “Three, maybe, if I did them one at a time . . . and fast. But, hmm, if I stuffed them in all at once? How many juicy stag sausages could I—”

The basin leapt from the table. It shattered on the hearth, a dark stain of water spreading among the shards. Esmelda chuckled and flicked droplets from her fingers. “All I really need is one,” she continued. “Any man could do what you couldn’t.” She stuck out her littlest finger and licked it, tip to base. “And I could have anyone I want,” she said, now using the finger to trace the outline of her bosom. “Even, oh, young King Sutton? It would only be a matter of finding the right . . . taste . . . to persuade him. Wouldn’t it, Ballard?”

But apparently that was all he could muster. Nothing else went flying, no invisible hand crept uninvited along her skin. Esmelda dried her face on her skirts and went for a broom.

Surviving Ballard in death was much like surviving him in life; the sooner she provoked him, the quicker he'd be spent. A few things broken or bruised, a bit of cleanup, and then she could rest.

Esmelda eyed the shattered basin at her feet. She still remembered the sharp, burning pain of a broken rib—the gift of an andiron to her chest when she wouldn't give Ballard what he wanted. She remembered the sweaty, stinking weight of him when he took it anyway. She'd thought she would die that night. Yet here she was.

She might not be rid of Ballard, but she'd endured the worst of him. He was no more dangerous than the rats now; just a daily evil. The worst she feared was that someone might witness his invisible tempers and think her a witch, but she'd grown to worry about that less over the years; Ballard only ever bothered her when she was alone, in the witching hour.

He couldn't really hurt her anymore, but she could hurt him. Her living was his torment; *she* was the king's cook now, and she was better. Perhaps that was what kept him there—rage, a lust for vengeance. Or maybe just lust. Either way, he was only a shade—an impotent shadow of his former self. That was worth a lifetime of broken crockery to Esmelda.

That was victory.

Esmelda had been even younger than Jamie when Ballard took her in—so young she barely remembered her life before. She'd been a Wanderer; that was obvious even if the old bastard hadn't spit it at her as an insult every day. She had the dark hair, the violet eyes, and the knife-edge bones in her face. She was tall, too, taller than most of the rose-pink, tawny-haired women of Castle Lochhunte. Esmelda looked like the itinerant spice traders who haunted the market towns.

Once, Esmelda had lived with a mother under the open sky, but that mother had grown sick and weak. She'd made a trade with the king's cook, coins for a daughter, and that was the end of her story.

But Esmelda still had the Wanderer's tongue, and a sprinkling of their knowledge; whether it'd been taught or was simply a part of her blood, Esmelda couldn't say. But it came to her, now and then: first, a suggestion to her master—young Esmelda pointing out a star-shaped seed or a blood-red powder among the trader's wares; later, a

precocious talent for learning. Soon enough, Ballard had made her his apprentice. He'd taught her the secrets of the kitchen even as she showed him how to make dishes sing.

But as he rose in the king's esteem, Ballard had become more than a master. He'd become a keeper, Esmelda his jealously guarded prize, blossoming and withering all at once within his care.

At times, he was almost fatherly—spooning food into her mouth to taste, slipping her the choicest morsels. But other times, Esmelda had to earn her supper on her knees, or stand hungry in the corner for days, watching, choking on her own parched tongue.

One day when she'd finally had enough, Esmelda went to market with Ballard and told a Wanderer what she wanted in their shared language, their secret code. She gave him silver stolen from Ballard's room. She gave him other things, too, all that she had, in exchange for a single berry that looks and smells like peppercorn but, when eaten, causes a man's heart to explode. Then she'd made a salve and spread it on her skin. When Ballard next put his mouth on her in the dark quiet of the kitchen, it was for the last time.

If there were rumors then—jealousy over Esmelda's promotion, her good looks and youth, distrust of her gender or heritage—and if tankards and kettles flew at her on their own in the kitchen at night—it mattered little. Esmelda soon surpassed her master. She ruled her kitchen with efficiency and skill. Under her care, the old king grew fatter and was happy, and life moved on.